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ABSTRACT

In order to play a proper role in the making of sound academic policy, the Board of Trustees must begin by taking itself seriously, and the first place for that is the choice of its members. It is essential that some members of the Board should be present or recent members of the professional academic community--teachers, research workers, librarians, or administrators. A judiciously constituted Board should be involved in such pivotal matters of admissions, curriculum, graduation requirements, selection, retention, promotion, tenure, and sabbaticals of faculty, leave policy, and compensation scales. In all, the role of the trustees should be policymaking, not administration, although in practice each one feeds the other. The most immediate way in which a trustee can verify the quality of faculty is being attentive to conditions of employment. Trustees must be accountable to faculty, in that they must accept the work and the often unpleasant decisions it entails. (Author/PG)

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The Board of Trustees and the Making of Academic Policy

The leadership role of college and university trustees was the subject of the Tenth Annual Trustee Conference of the Regents of the University of the State of New York, which was held in New York City on March 5, 1974. Harold C. Martin, President of Union College and Chancellor of Union University, ventured to discuss what he termed "the explosive topic" of "The Board of Trustees and the Making of Academic Policy." An abridged version of his remarks follows.

By the average college and university faculty body—each uniquely average, of course—trustees are most admired for generous passivity. Yet faculties do not really want a Board of Trustees full of ninnies. Universally they would welcome, I am sure, men and women of distinction if they could be confident that distinction would be accompanied by wisdom and that wisdom would be what faculties think it to be. In their view, the academic business of the college or university is their business, and who can blame them for wanting to run it?

In fact, even the academic business is faculty business only in a narrow sense. It is fundamentally public business, whether the institution is public or private; and because it is public business, its management must clearly link responsibility with public accountability.

By and large, academic people think and care little about many matters which must be of concern to trustees—investments, fund-raising, public relations, even long-range planning. They want to feel secure about academic program and their own independence. On these matters they believe that the first and final word should belong to them. After all, they are the experts. The surgeon does not permit laymen to supervise his operating theater; the priest does not invite vestryment into the confessional; why should faculty members tolerate direction from merchants, bankers, and lawyers?

The analogies have some merit. In the lecture hall, the seminar room, the laboratory, the professorial study, there is no proper place for trustees. All that is said or written in those places may not be true or just; some is certain to be offensive to received opinion and taste. But trustees can claim nothing better for themselves in their own domains. No one should be very much surprised that trustees sometimes wish there were a way of culling fools and incompetents; and there are indeed grounds for proceeding against nonfeasance, misfeasance, and malfeasance. But generally the reproof of peers and students is a better corrective. In the end, trustees must live with the nature of the institution they govern. It is supposed to be a battleground of ideas, and there can be no battleground where there are no differences.

If there is one clear responsibility for trustees in this regard, it is to make sure there *are* competent disagreements and fervid confrontations. A great good would be accomplished were every trustees' handbook to begin with an explicit commitment to protection of academic freedom and a further commitment to encouragement of its exercise.

The Composition of the Board

In order to play a proper role in the making of sound academic policy, the Board of Trustees must begin by taking itself seriously, and the first place for that is in the choice of its members. Ordinarily, most or all trustees are themselves college graduates; often they are alumni of the institution they formally govern. These characteristics by themselves put them on about equal footing with students. Faculty members lie somewhere between trustees and students; their experience is richer than students', though usually more narrow that trustees'; moreover, as teachers they are also learners. For that reason, it seems almost essential to me that some members of every Board of Trustees should be present or recent members of the professional academic community—teachers, research-workers, librarians, or administrators.

Clearly the presence of members of the academic community on a Board of Trustees is no panacea, but it is a good thing. Yet it should not be overdone, for the fundamental virtue of a Board of Trustees lies not in its

being expert in academic affairs, but in its having a sound and separate perspective on them.

There are two ways to provide a continuous and immediate academic voice on the Board. The one more difficult to achieve is selection of people associated with other institutions; simpler is allotment of trustee places to faculty members elected by their peers from the institution itself. We are fortunate at Union to have both. From my experience with them and from personal experience as an outside academic person on several Boards I can say with some assurance that the academic presence is useful. It should not be numerically strong enough to represent a majority, but as a minority it can make for better decisions by the Board as a whole.

It goes without saying that if a Board has academic members, it will use them in committees which have a special responsibility for academic affairs. Not exclusively there, of course, because academic members need the perspective of the whole as much as any others. And one other suggestion: there is a good deal to be said for structuring the committee system so that there is a parallel between Board committees and campus committees. What such parallelism provides is increased possibility of a clear flow of information and argument. At Union it also provides common meeting sessions at three of the four official Board meetings each year, a time-consuming process but one that is worth the time it requires.

Trustees and Academic Policy

A judiciously constituted Board and an effectively coordinated committee structure is necessary but not sufficient. Beyond both lies the determination of the role for trustees in those pivotal matters of admissions, curriculum, graduation requirements, selection and retention and promotion of faculty, tenure, sabbatical and leave policy, compensation scales, and the like. In all, the role of the trustees should be policy-making, not administration, although in practice each one feeds the other.

Consider the matter of admissions policy, to begin with. When in the early 'forties the Harvard Corporation announced its determination to make Harvard a truly "national" college, its decision produced a chain reaction throughout the college, altering not simply admissions recruitment and selection, but curriculum and climate as well. When, thirty years later, the Board of Higher Education of New York City announced the policy of open admissions, it precipitated an even more radical series of changes. Both decisions, I might note, were opposed by considerable segments of faculty at the time. In both instances, the governing boards acted from the special perspective of those who see their responsibility as one to the public weal and to the future.

Most trustee actions in the matter of admissions will not be so grand or so grandiose, but they should have that characteristic of public- and future-mindedness. By accident or design, most colleges have some sort of "mission"—to use the term sanctified by the new state master-plan reports—it is important only that, in the light of that mission, trustees should commit themselves to the policy-making that best fulfills it.

Then there is the matter of graduation requirements. I know a fine liberal arts college which demands tested proficiency in public speaking of all its graduates. Most students dislike the required courses; many faculty members deplore them as a waste of time; but the trustees stick to their conviction. The principle involved is the same as for ROTC, a core curriculum, or courses in religion. These all have to do with mission and with the character of the institution, and trustees cannot ignore them. Nor can they dictate them. What they can do is make them the subject of healthy debate and continuous institutional self-assessment. After debate, trustees may find themselves at loggerheads with faculty. They may shuffle the matter off to a special consultant, of course, if they can find one whom both parties will trust and who is foolish enough to be caught in the middle. But in the end the decision is a prerogative of trustees, if they think it really important.

Is the same to be said for the curriculum as a whole and in all its details? Clearly not. Generally speaking, trustees seldom want to get into the curricular cockpit, anyway. In most cases, they limit themselves to curricular decisions as they impinge on budget. Yet faculty themselves are far from being of one mind, so this is not only a matter of experts in conflict with amateurs, faculty with trustees. However, there is a symbolic concern to consider. Faculty members need to feel that their disagreement and agreement lead somewhere; the more passionate they are in attack and defense, the more evident they make their commitment to earnestness about teaching. This is so important to the strength of an institution that trustees should intervene only when the health of the institution itself is imperiled.

Quality of Faculty

Curriculum is not, of course, a self-operating business; any responsible concern which trustees feel for curriculum must be represented by a concern for the welfare of the faculty body. This poses an especially difficult problem. Average trustees do not spend more than six or eight days a year on campus; they rarely visit a classroom; and even their infrequent conversations with faculty members are likely to be punctuated by martinis. How are they to know whether or not the faculty is a good one and whether or not it is productive?

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The most immediate way in which a trustee can verify the quality and performance of faculty is by being attentive to conditions of employment. In the first place, he or she should know what are good conditions: a reasonable workload, satisfactory facilities and clerical help, freedom from harassment, competitive salaries, a decent fringe-benefit package, reasonably reliable modes of evaluation to reward merit. The importance of good working conditions is simple: they attract good faculty because they are signs of respect and are essential to intellectual health.

All these matters are properly the direct responsibility of administrative officers, but trustees need to understand them and to make sure that faculty know they understand them. The present mood of militancy among faculties everywhere assures that they will not be overlooked, but I believe that a good deal of the militancy would be less strident if faculty felt that trustees were really concerned about working conditions.

I have not myself yet met a trustee like the one who is reported to have asked what the teaching load was and, on being told that it was nine hours, remarked that that seemed like a fair day's work. But I have again and again heard trustees opine that they wish all they had to do was teach nine hours a week. That is sheer ignorance—sheer and dangerous. It matches in depth of ignorance the remark which came from the school trustee who offered me my first job. He was president and majority stock-holder in a local bank, and his annual country-club dues were exactly the same as my salary. "We're paying you two hundred dollars a class to teach five classes a week," he said. "That comes to a thousand dollars a year—pretty good for a teacher." It was 1937. I took the offer, but I haven't forgotten the remark.

While it is true that good faculty are attracted by good working conditions, it is also true that not-so-good faculty are attracted by them. Therefore trustees cannot assume that conditions by themselves will assure quality.

No Board of Trustees should permit the administration to be casual about the procedures of employment, continuance, promotion, and dismissal. This is a litigious time, and there are agencies aplenty to espouse the cause of people who have been denied due process or who simply have not had it made available to them. As a matter of good management, trustees should require written codes covering every stage of the employment process. No one can spell out precise criteria of performance, but any Board can make sure that there is a rational process and that it is scrupulously followed.

The toughest problems, those of faculty rank and ratios among ranks, tenure and tenure quotas require more of trustees than admonition to the administrative staff. Let me make clear that I know of no better system of faculty selection than that by peers. But within any single institution, no matter how prestigious, peers often represent too settled and narrow a body of opinion. Therefore, trustees should be quick to encourage and willing to budget for processes which call on opinion from outside, particularly for fresh appointments to senior rank and for decisions on tenure.

Collegiate institutions, like other institutions, are reluctant to rupture personal relationships, produce embarrassment, engender political battles, from the painful process of forced separation. Both faculty and administrators will often settle for less than they want at the point of selection and will rarely admit mistakes or correct errors. Trustees lucky enough to have a chief administrator with a clear sense of quality and a determination to get it should support him or her heartily; those not so lucky should get a different one, because this is the main person who develops criteria for those who must do the choosing. Faculty, I am convinced, respect toughness on this score even when it runs counter to opinion about a particular candidate.

What constitutes fair criteria? In the main, fairness is a matter of making rules, publicizing them, and sticking to them. But the making of rules is no simple matter. Four considerations should govern rules about the composition of faculty. Their relative weight may vary from institution to institution, but they form a good basis for trustee policy on appointment and retention. The first, naturally, is quality, as much as the institution can afford and attract. The second is renewal, the assurance of a continuous flow of fresh talent into the institution. The third is flexibility, so that new needs can be met as they develop. And the fourth is economy, in the radical sense of that word, getting the greatest value from the resources available.

The Dilemma of Ratios and Quotas

These four considerations require a management policy for personnel, and such a policy inevitably requires a decision about ratios. In a time like this, when opportunities for academic employment are limited, I know such a statement sounds heartless. The AAUP calls it immoral, and the teacher unions think it worse than that—"fascistic" is one of their gentler terms. Yet, *especially* in these times, an institution cannot hope to remain good unless it protects itself against dominance by a heavily tenured and aging faculty body. The condition of the Civil Service and the Church should have taught us that.

Consider a steady-state scenario, a likely possibility for the next three decades: no growth in enrollment and presumably n growth in the size of faculty body. If we take age twenty-five as the beginning and sixty-five as the retirement posts, and assume an even distribution of faculty over the forty-year period, we have a 2.5% attrition every year, 10% in four years. Adding deaths and defections, we might double that rate, giving a 10% attrition every two years. I would think that high enough to satisfy all four considerations I previously named and would welcome it as a substitute for quotas.

But reality intrudes. To begin with, even a large faculty body is not likely to have such a beautifully even age-distribution for a number of reasons—spurts in past enrollment, special conditions and priorities in some disciplines, even the general state of the economy. More significant, of course, is the almost universal practice of granting career-long tenure after a brief probationary period. (Some faculty members move from one institution to another when opportunity beckons; yet that is part of the problem since often the better ones leave, and a system that fails to provide for their replacement by equally good people will deteriorate.)

The Keast report of a year back argues against quotas for tenure but suggests healthy balance; that is rather like the casuistical position of the Civil Rights Office on sex and racial balance—no quotas but a general regulation that is achievable only by quotas of some kind.

I've been on this merry-go-round long enough to conclude that trustees can't win popular acclaim, no matter what action they take; yet they can't avoid the contest. They can say, "We'll take our stand on quality alone, promote and tenure on the basis of merit, and let other considerations take care of themselves." They may subsequently find the institution caught by a tenured surplus in one area while another area cries out for staff. I think they *will* sooner or later find themselves with quality defined in terms less useful than some fresh faculty might provide. And I'm certain that, unless they have dollars to burn, they will find themselves short of money to pay their senior qualified faculty as they should be paid. The result will be a flight of the best to institutions that have a different policy.

The alternative is for trustees to say something like this: "We intend to maintain, by a careful process of evaluation, the best people we can retain, but only so many as will make it possible for us to give good younger people the prospect of tenure with respectable salaries, and only as many as will protect the capacity of the institution to respond to deep changes in the educational pattern." That seems to me the correct posture for responsible trustees, but I recognize that it may not remain a possible one.

If what lies ahead, through unionization or even through federal or state regulation is a policy of retention based on the right-to-work argument, the responsibility of trustees will be no less great. In place of the renewal and flexibility which a steady flow of new talent helps to provide, trustees will have to provide for the creation of internal job-retraining and upgrading such as some industries have developed.

Colleges and universities have been slow to think in terms of research and development as they relate to the teaching process. There are reasons for that reluctance. Translation from one academic field to another is very difficult, even for the most competent, especially in the upper reaches of an academic discipline. Moreover, little that warrants respect has yet come out of the thousands of research efforts in pedagogy. Most teachers know how to teach better than they do now already; if they had time, energy, and hope, they would do it without recourse to teacher-training. Even though I sound pessimistic on the score of R&D I acknowledge that it is better than nothing, and I'm quite sure that conscience will require that it be provided, at costs that will be considerable, if policies for the control of faculty spread become infeasible.

Planning From An Informed Perspective

Let me say a final word about long-range planning. The primary responsibility for leadership in this area lies with the administration. It is at once detached from special interests and informed about general developments in education. I am not infrequently dismayed by how little faculty members know about what is going on in higher education outside their own fields, and I am equally dismayed by the common experience with trustees of hearing the latest publicity piece in some newspaper or magazine advanced as certain truth. Without claiming particular prescience for administrators, they are likely to have a sound overview of significant and relevant developments. Their job, then, becomes not so much one of doing the long-range planning themselves, but of educating both faculty and trustees to what must be considered.

This process of education lays on trustees some responsibility not to rely on the minimal and often distorted information provided by the public press. They ought to be ready to read reports or summaries of reports coming from educational commissions. And they ought to spend as much time on the internal reports coming from their institution as they would spend on a marketing report from corporation headquarters. This is an important part of their obligation to have an informed perspective from which to consider the problems presented to them by committees and administrators.

An informed perspective is, in sum, the key to the role trustees should play in college and university affairs. It is especially important in academic matters, where their authority is most likely to be challenged. We are fond of saying that war is too serious a business to be left to the generals. Properly understood, I think that this statement exemplifies a sound general principle. But the principle is sound only if, in this case, the trustees know enough to respect the experts without becoming captive to their point of view. Trustees must indeed be accountable to faculty, in ways I have tried to make specific here, but they must also be accountable to others and that second accountability is one they can't satisfactorily perform unless they accept the work and the often unpleasant decisions it entails. If they do, they have indeed an important role to play in the academic affairs of the institution, and they should not permit any argument about exclusive domain to deter them.

Harold C. Martin